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The Origin And Evolution Of Religion

Bernice Cleo Riley

Prairie View State College

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THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF RELIGION

Every religion is a Product of human evolution and has been conditioned by social environment. Since man has developed from even lower than savagery and was once intellectually a mere animal, it is reasonable to attribute to him in that state no more religious consciousness than is possessed by an animal. What then the historian must ask are the factors and what the means whereby humanity has encased itself in this shell of religion, which almost every where has been raised as a protective growth about the social body?

The simplest answer to this question has been that man is not a mere animal but differs from the beast in having an immortal soul and a religious instinct. The argument may be looked at from the following point of view: assuming that there are no races which can be shown to be utterly devoid of religion, this element of human thought, is universal.

The historian may assure the universality of religion (for there are human groups which make this an assumption of doubtful validity) nor the existence of a soul because even the "religious instincts" does not require this assumption. Therefore the instinct itself cannot be assumed nor is such an instinct probable. Child-

ren have no religious ideas or impressions, personally, the investigation may or may not believe in God, soul, and a future life; but his task is merely to show how belief in these and other components of religion arise and he can do this only by arranging in orderly progression all available data.

Theories to account for the origin and explain the growth of religion are numerous. Orthodoxy maintained in Ancient India that there was one inspired religion and all other religions were decadent from it, while in the sixth century B. C. Heterodox Hindus said that all religions were invented by the Priests for their own profit. The same theories sprang up independently centuries later in Europe. It is sufficient to say of these and similar theories that they were crude but probably honest guesses based on inadequate information.

In the immediate past, Sunday theories have arisen based on a wider survey and deeper knowledge. They alone demand attention at present since they were founded on an immense number of careful observations and are upheld by different schools of capable investigators.

The first, which is still held by many sociologists, is that connected with the names of Sir Edward Taylor and Herbert Spencer. It is usually called "Animism" and is based on these facts and inductions. The savage

believes that what is active is alive, being alive, an object, animal or material, has within it the same spirit which man recognizes in himself. Hence he peoples the world with spirit, inhabited objects. He thinks also that when he dreams, his spirit is abroad preforming the acts which he acquires the notion of a spirit independent of the body and attributes to other man, animals and powers similar to his own. Again, as he sees in his dreams a dead man apparently still active, he infers that spirit of the dead still live and that he himself when dead will live as will his animals and weapons. Because still living spirits may be malicious, the savage placates the potential joes; hence offering to ghosts. Ghostly spirits are gradually endowed with more superhuman power and are the revered Gods.

The chief objections to this theory is: first, that the most primitive savage does not possess so clear an idea of spirit indistinction from body as is here implied; second, that the argument does not account in a satisfactory manner for undoubted cases of direct worship of natural phenomena; third, that if the theory were true, one would expect to find a universal cult of ghosts which is by no means the case.

The second theory, called naturalism, with which is generally connected the name Max Muller, but which

is widely held by other German scholars, it might almost be called the German theory as contrasted with English animism, is based on the tendency of savages to fear and revere objects of nature that seem to them powerful, such as a waterfall or thunderstorm or majestic tree, to all of which they attribute life and anthropomorphic nature. In like manner the reverse venerable human phenomena, Kings and Wizards, and the people, the sky with imagined Kings Wizards as Gods of natural phenomena with underlings on the earth. Man instinctively regards the sun as a great personage and the moon and stars as mother and children or as the shepherd and sheep. Man personifies all objects of nature and reverses what is awesome.

The chief objections to this theory are that it assumes in the savage too pronounced tendency towards personification and that it ignores animism altogether or hold that a belief in spirits toward natural phenomena is made the base of all religion owing to instances cited by Muller of misunderstanding myths by later generations, leading to perverted religious views, this has been described as the theory holding that religion arises from a disease of language; but this is incorrect, since the question of language is not vital to theory.

A theory that religion is the child of magic has been developed by Sir J. G. Frazer, whose formula is

explained on the supposition that man tries to control nature by magical means and finding this impossible resorts to entreaty which is the hall mark of religion as distinguished from magic. In fact there is a good deal to be said for the objection urged by Durkheim, to the effect that magic is the child of religion rather than that religion is the child of magic. Durkheim's own theory, which is general the French theory, has no formal designation but may be called collectivism, though illusionism would be a fitting name for it. It assumes totemism as the earliest form of religion, holds incidentally that the totem--name comes from some convenient animal living near by and builds up all religious data on the distinction between the taboos, or conceived in human affairs. The collective representation of a human group in regard to taboo things is religious belief and this belief as to the secret power or totemic force acts as a moral power. The totem is the symbol of the group as well as the totemic force, a power which becomes the God of the community. Since it is at the symbol of the society and of the God, that God and the society must be one and the same. The God is in fact the clan personified as all religions, having a totemic origin, pass through the same phases, it follows that God and society are identical. All religious rites

are social in origin and exhibit rules of conduct as to sacred things. Collective representation is regarded to a mass of sacred things leads and of extraordinary powers. Since collective representation is produced in the main hyssical excitement it follows that religion is having mental effervescence. It is accordingly, merely an idea or illusion, but as its effects are real it may be said to have reality. We find that man has worshiped everything on earth including himself, stones, hills, flowers, trees, streams, wells oceans, and animal. He has worshiped everthing he can think of., beneath the earth, metal, caves serpents, and underworld ghosts. Finally, he has worshiped everything between earth and heaven and everything in the heavens above, mist, wind, cloud, rainbow, stars, moon, sun, the sky itself though only in part has he worshiped the spirit of these objects yet with all this bewildering Jumble of discredit, man to his credit has never really worshiped anything save that what he imagined behind these phenomena the thing he sought and feared was power. //

Categories, such as those of Saussaye, who divides religion objects of worship into heavenly and earthly or those of Max Muller whose divisions are objects "seizeable, half seizeable and non seizeable," as illustrated by a stone, a hill, and a star are not useful and may be worse than useless in suggesting a false chrono-

1
 Hookman, Claude — The Origin of Religion; pp. 81-92
 Appleton Publishing Co., 1933

logical series, for some of the lowest savages worship stars and half civilized men to day worship stones. There is no ascending scale followed by all men. But for convenience we shall have to examine these objects in order and may as well begin with the worship of stones, and hills, things apparently most lifeless. Some of the people that have worshiped the stones are: Finns, South Sea Islanders, Africans, Redskins, Greeks, Romans Egyptians, and Chinese at present the inhabitant Kateri in South India worship a stone, which if neglected will turn into a wild ox, and in Northern India not only the wild tribes but recognized castes of civilized society worshiped stones which they beleived to be alive and possessed of volition. Food and drink are presented to stones today in Nigoria to effect curses. There is in these cases no idea of spirit in the stone, it is the stone itself as being powerful which is propitiated.²

We find that the worship of trees is one of the oldest as it is one of the most widely extended forms of worship. It is also one of the latest to yield to a higher type of religion. It appeals to the savage who fears the forest; to the Barbarian to the civilized man to whom the tree is emblematic of divinity. The deification of plants and grains is later than that of trees. Probably the tree would as a whole was an earlier object

2. Ind 4 #1 p 94-101

of cult than any individual tree, as the savage dreads the power of the Jungle and placates it rather than that of any one tree known to him.

Between man and beast there is, ^{but} to a savage, only a linguistic difference; in other respects the beast is man's younger brother as the Hindu calls, him ~~not~~ as he also calls the Gods the younger brothers of the demens, but because he recognizes in the animal a being akin to himself, having the same feelings, desires, and needs, but as in the case of some men, also gifted with superior intelligence lead a common man to approach the beast with religious aspect. The first mature fakir too is the savage, who publishes accounts of animal intelligence of hear consorting with men, of animals as progenitors and creators, of sapient serpents, and of frog maidens marrying humans. The soul of man when he is alive and when he is dead is liable to pass into the body of an animal and God in the same way may inhabit a beast. Finally the beast may be the ancestor of a clan of men or may, like a plant, as in Australia develop into man.

Such in brief is the Philosophy of animal worship. Animals are worshiped as great living powers and as ghosts just as men worshiped while in addition there is something more mysterious in an animal, powers of strength and cunning to which men cannot attain.

Historically man worshiped first and inquired later what he was worshipping so we may leave the inquiry as of what is implied by phenomena of ancestor-worship till we have examined the phenomena themselves.

The worship of ancestors is the worship not of ghosts in general but of a restricted band of ghosts, in turn is only one band among other bands of spirits.

A primitive community want to beleive in innumerable powers belonging to innumerable objects and places. It fears some of them; it recognizes some of them as friends. They have all mysterious powers. The individual is surrounded by them; the world is full of them. One must not molest them for he cannot do so safely.

Up to this point we have examined the data of religious origins as objectives historical phenomena without raising the question whether these data correspond to anything real. We may ask ourselves whether there is any reason to beleive in the reality of religion. Is there only a mass of nebular hypothesis regarding Gods and God to examine as historical products similiar to other human illusions, such as the philospher's stone and the fountain of youth or the religious phenomena of the world weak but illuminative expression of an underlying verity? Belief is wide spread, but by extablishing the fact of belief we do not establish the reality of what is believed

only the reality of believing. In India the first monotheistic trend did not pursue the process of elevating the sun or any other natural phenomenon to supreme place; that course led to pantheism. Rather it argued out first a creative power than took that power as head of the pantheon, and finally recognized it as the Supreme God, to whom other Gods were mere underling spirits. Probably in all these cases, the idea of a dominant God went together with a more developed social state, as is the case even among African savages.

So as the Hindus raised a great empire, the rule of the head-God became more imperialistic. The Gods even earlier were arranged in Castes, but the notion of a Father-God, whose children were all other Gods and all beings besides, took the firmest hold. Despite the advancing growth of the pantheistic conception, despite the atheistic attitude of Buddhism, this faith was never destroyed though it had its unception in Philosophy and has drawn its strength from Philosophic theologians.³

But a monotheistic trend is still not Monotheism. A host of lesser Gods still survives even when their powers have been curtailed. The Gods that endure must fill a lasting want and the lowest Gods remain only for time or only in the lowest intellectual strata.

The Gods thus elevated arrange themselves gradually into groups reflecting the mental and social state of

³ Koller, J. S. - *Anthropology*, p. 14-22
Macmillan & Co, 1924

their worshipers. To the restricted outlook of the savage, local Gods, rivers, forests, mountains, and ghosts are vastly more important than the heavenly Gods, sky, sun, or moon. Each village has its own tutelary divinity, who may, as ghost, become a general God; but despite this, as compared with ghosts, the phenomena, of nature make the chief Gods as in America, both North and South, and Africa. With a broader interpretation, such natural phenomena were also worshipped by the Aryans; even Zoroaster fought a vain fight against them. On the Semitic side, in Babylan and Assyria, sun, moon, storm water, earth hold the most conspicuous position and the same thing may be said of the western Semites, to whom the spirits of storm and fertility, of sun and moon especially appealed. In China; given over though it was to the worship of ancestral spirits, sky, sun, moon, hills, and streams were all objects of devout worship, even ghosts became spirits of vegetation.

Thus the Nature-Gods became an Aristocracy; others remain what they were, low-caste demons. But as these demons are revered only by the lowly, so too with even the higher Gods; their turn to fall comes as surely as he rises, lets fall the Gods he cannot raise with him. Yet from a religious point of view both the christian monotheist and the Vedanta pantheist have a practical object of beleif a personal supreme moral govemor of the

universe, God. And more, both Montheist and Pantheist recognized that absolute Divinity may assume a third form not that of the absolute, not that of the Supreme God, but that of the still more sympathetic divine man, Vishnu as in Cornate in Krishna and "I and my father are one." More over, as the atheistic philosophy of Buddhism gradually changed till it converted Buddha himself into divinity and at the same time recognized that an absolute must lie behind phenomena, this religion also became an advocate of the view that the divine manifests itself in three ways. Religion itself, in what we are pleased to call its mystic phase, is the experience in which the soul thus becomes conscious of itself as one with the divine soul.

It is an experience which can convince only him who experiences it, but to him the Proof is irrefragable and not to be gainsaid.

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